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Joseph Islands,

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APOSTLE OF THE CREEK INDIANS.

REV. I. T. TICHENOR, D. D.



"THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD IS JESU



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∴ Joseph Islands. ∴

One day, in the then frontier town of LaFayette, Alabama, just before the removal of the Creeks to their Western home, a tall, raw-boned man, whose face bespoke both great kindliness and determination, was seen to lay his hand upon the shoulder of a young Indian and heard to say, "Joe! Don't you mind these bad boys, come with me." That man was Rev. Frank Calloway, whose name is yet fragrant among the churches of east Alabama. The young Indian was Joseph Islands, who became the Apostle of the Creek nation. A party of rude boys were sorely annoying him, when Calloway, who knew him well, saw the fire of revenge flash from his dark eye. His hand was upon his scalping knife and, in a moment more, blood would flow. At the kindly yet determined words of the preacher, Islands paused and, yielding to the strong will of his judicious friend, walked

away with him. The heart of the good man was deeply moved towards the young savage who had obeyed him. It was probably the last interview they would ever have. Islands with his tribe was to go west in a few days, and this was the only remaining opportunity he would ever enjoy, to reach his soul with the truths of the gospel. As in the presence of eternity, the good man plied him with the truths of the Scripture and urged him to seek the Saviour. Islands was impressed by the kindness and earnestness of the man of God. Before the interview terminated, Calloway had given him a Bible and received the promise on his part, to carry it with him to his new home, in the far west. This promise he kept according to the letter, but not in the spirit in which it was made. Before he started on his long Journey, which ended far beyond the great Mississippi, he placed that Bible at the bottom of the box in which his valuables were packed, and there it lay for many long days, neglected and forgotten.

Islands, grown to full manhood, was a leader in the wild revelry of his young associates; he had learned to play the violin, and consequently his services were indispensable at all their gatherings. One night, when whiskey had been freely used by the party, a quarrel ensued, and Islands' dearest friend was killed. The next day, an old negro named "Billy" was ordered to dig a grave for the murdered man. Islands, sad and lonely, went

out to see the spot where his friend was to be laid. Old Billy was a Christian, and while Islands sat by and saw him excavate the narrow house, his heart was moved for the young Indian. He talked with him about death, about the great beyond, about Jesus and the resurrection. Islands was deeply impressed—the arrows of conviction stuck in his soul. Many times afterward, he sought “Uncle Billy’s” cabin, and learned more and more about the way of life. At length he found peace in believing ; it was a time of great joy. He and Uncle Billy met and sung and prayed and rejoiced together. Then Islands remembered his long-forgotten Bible. It was brought forth from the depths of the box ; and, while he would read, Uncle Billy would explain, as best he could, the wonders of “that old, old story.” For days and days they communed together in secret.

At length the thought came to them, “this is a day of good tidings and we hold our peace.” A most stringent law forbade the introduction of Christianity among the Indians. The penalty for its violation was heavy. To every one found engaged in worship according to the forms of the white man’s religion, thirty-nine lashes were to be administered by the police. But Islands and Uncle Billy did not regard this edict. They talked privately to their friends about the great salvation, invited them to meet with them at the secret spot chosen for religious worship, and soon gathered

a little group that braved the dangers of the law. One after another of these was born into the Kingdom of God and, as each professed faith in Christ, his name was placed upon the list of disciples, until thirty names appeared upon the roll. Meantime the authorities had taken the alarm. The hated religion of the white man was secretly making progress. The mounted police, "the light horse" as they were called, were ordered to be more vigilant and to execute with impartial justice the law against heresy. As vigilant and cunning as their foes, the Christian Indians found secluded places for their worship and continued their meetings. Spies were set to watch them; and many were the stories told of the shrewdness and cunning manifested by the Christian party, to escape detection by their numerous and active enemies.

One night, a spy followed some of them near to their place of worship. He had lost the trail and while seeking for some new indication to guide him, he heard the voice of singing. Stealthily creeping through the bushes, he came to an open spot, beyond which he saw a light, and heard the notes of song. Prone upon the ground he crawled snake-like through the tall grass, towards the place. As he neared it the melody ceased and then the voice of prayer caught his ear. Islands was praying for his people, for his persecutors, for the police who were hunting them, for the

spies that were dogging their track. He listened, his heart stood still as he heard his own name called and the Great Spirit invoked to thwart his evil purposes and to change his heart. There, as he lay concealed in the tall grass, the thought of his great guilt shook him like the tremors of an earthquake. The prayer ended and the melody of Zion's song arose once more. The first stanza told of Jesus' bleeding love for guilty man; and the voices of the singers caught the emotions of these hearts and wafted them heavenward upon the midnight air. Pausing for breath, overawed by a presence he could not understand, he listened to the song. He had never heard such melody. He had listened to the South wind when it sighed through the leafless forest, waking its thousand wind harps to strains of plaintive melody. He had heard the river as it rushed headlong down the steep, singing its song "to the sea, to the sea." He had heard feathered songsters of his forest home singing in the sunlight, singing in the shadow, singing when the moonbeams covered the wide land with their sheen of glory; but he had never heard song like that. It spoke to him of light and love from the Great Spirit. It spoke to him of his own dark guilt, in seeking to betray and punish these people. He wondered that a thunderbolt did not strike him dead. He trembled lest the solid earth should open and swallow him down into the very abyss of the lost. At length

he tried to rise, but his limbs refused to carry him. He tried to crawl away from that awful spot, but he could not. The only movement he could make was to roll over and over, and thus he gained the bushes from which he had first heard the voice of singing. There he lay in an agony never felt before, crying, fearing, trembling, praying, how long he never knew.

At the next meeting of the disciples, he stood in their midst and, with penitential sobs, told the strange story of his effort to bring them to punishment and how the Spirit of the Lord had arrested him and held him a trembling captive. Before the meeting closed, he found peace in believing, and saw, with joy unspeakable, his name enrolled among the chosen of the Lord.

But these Christians were not always so fortunate. One night, the light horse surrounded their place of worship. Closing every avenue of escape, the captain ordered them to be taken out one by one, and receive the punishment prescribed by the law. With serene faces and patient submission, first the men and then the women, underwent the cruel torture of the lash. When Obadiah Holmes received similar treatment from the New England Puritans as a remedy for his Baptist faith, he said, as the sheriff loosened his hands from the stake to which he had been bound, "You have struck me with roses." So these savages, made new men in Christ, took joyfully the stripes that were

laid upon them with unsparing hand. The executioners could not withstand the influence of those faces, radiant with holy joy ; and one after another let fall the cruel thong and surrender it into the hands of another. The captain at first shamed the cowardly weakness of his men and bade them lay on the lash ; but when the women came and stood unflinching the fearful ordeal, a feeling not of pity, but of awe overwhelmed him. The Roman centurion, as he saw the darkened heaven and heard the death cry of the crucified One, exclaimed : " Surely this was the Son of God." So, as he looked upon these women bearing their torture not only bravely, but with smiling faces and words of thanksgiving to Him who had redeemed them, this plumed and painted savage felt the conviction pierce his heart like an arrow, " These are God's people." There remained scarcely strength of arm or purpose in all that fierce band of braves, to feebly finish the execution of the law.

Next day the captain of the light horse resigned his position and several of his men followed his example. " We cannot whip these people for praying and loving Jesus," said they, " We would rather be whipped ourselves than to whip these women. We cannot do it."

The angry chiefs sought others more savage and determined to supply their place and enforce the law with rigid exactness. But it was in vain. The first time they captured the Christians, they

found it impossible to inflict the full punishment upon them. Their determination was broken and their hands were paralyzed by the meek submission of those who rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for their Lord. They came back to the chiefs of the nation and said, "There are no other people like these Christians. We cannot whip them any more. The Great Spirit claims them. They are his children, we must let them alone."

More and more feeble became the efforts to suppress the religion of the white man and the bolder became the disciples, until they scarcely attempted to conceal their times and places of worship. The best families of the nation had members who were Christians. At length, it was announced that Chilly McIntosh, one of the most wealthy, powerful and popular chiefs of the tribe, had become a Christian. Under the wide-spread excitement, the National Council met and repealed the odious law. Christianity had won.

Before the meeting of the council, Joseph Islands had moved into a new house which he had just completed. As soon as he heard that the law was repealed, he moved back into his old home and gave the new one for a place of worship. This was the first house of worship in the Creek Nation.

Thus a great and effectual door was opened to the gospel. Joseph Islands, who was a man of

property, exhausted his estate and gave his life to the evangelization of his people. Not in vain have been his labors. There is to-day a Baptist church for every thousand of population in the Creek nation, and more than a dozen native preachers break the bread of life to these churches.

Somewhere, we know not where, on the wide prairies, thirty years ago, sorrowful hearts laid to rest all of Joseph Islands that could die. A nation gathered at his grave. No stone marks the spot where he sleeps. His monument is in his works : and long as those prairies shall spread their green bosoms to the sun, so long will the loving and laborious life of Joseph Islands influence his people towards Christ and God and heaven.

Servant of God, well done,
Rest from thy loved employ ;
The battle's fought, the victory won,
Enter thy Master's joy.

A GLANCE AT OUR INDIAN RECORD.

How have our Indian wars originated? In violation of explicit agreements, we began to build forts Phil. Kearney, Reno and Smith, in the Sioux country, in 1866. The Indians flew to arms, and the cost of that war was a million of dollars a month.

In 1864-65 there was war with the Cheyennes. Despite treaties, "settlers were pouring in," the payment of annuities had ceased, food was scarce, the Indians were sad and depressed, and yet they kept the peace! Then a white man alleged that an Indian had stolen some of his horses, and an officer, without investigating the facts, sent soldiers to seize Indian ponies, and war began. The chief, who was refused protection by the Governor of Colorado, sent a flag of truce to meet advancing troops, and saw his two brothers killed under that flag. The Indians compelled thus to stand for their lives, fought desperately. Then followed the *white* "atrocities" of the Sand Creek massacre—"a butchery that would have disgraced the tribes of Central Africa," says Bishop Whipple.

We had war with the Sioux from 1852 to 1854, though for thirty years previously they had boasted that they had not killed a white man. How did that war begin? A Mormon emigrant train, crossing the plains, lost a cow, which a band of Sioux, at peace, finding, took. Complaint was

made at Fort Laramie, and a lieutenant and squad of soldiers were sent to recover the cow, which turned to beef had been eaten. The Indians *offered to pay for the cow*, but the lieutenant demanded, for punishment, the Indian who had taken her, and being refused—can one believe it?—ordered his soldiers to fire, and the Indian chief fell dead. Those soldiers had fired their last shot. They were killed where they stood, and thus began the great Sioux war, which cost many lives, and forty millions of dollars.—*See Speech of Prof. Seelye, in Congress, April 13, 1876.*

In 1868, on land assigned them by the United States, stood a small Indian village, whose chief hearing that troops were near, had asked protection from the commandant of Fort Cobb, under whose shadow they dwelt. Four days afterward, General Custer and his troops surrounded the village and spared neither man, woman or child. "The Custer massacre" followed as revenge from other Indians.

Says Prof. Seelye, formerly Indian Commissioner: "There has not been an Indian war for the past fifty years, in which the whites have not been the aggressors."

Selected.